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Economic and Social Council

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Resumed organizational session for 1999
6 and 7 May 1999
Agenda item 2
Adoption of the agenda and other organizational matters

Humanitarian affairs segment of the substantive session of the Economic and Social Council

Note by the Secretariat

1. The Economic and Social Council, in its agreed conclusions 1998/1,[1] adopted at the humanitarian affairs segment of its substantive session of 1998, requested the Secretary-General, in consultation with Governments, to recommend to the Council, at its organizational session, ways in which the humanitarian segment might be enhanced so as to strengthen the role of the Council as regards the coordination and policy guidance of the United Nations system humanitarian activities.

2. In pursuance of this request, a note verbale, dated 15 March 1999, was sent to Member States and observer missions, requesting their comments and suggestions. Responses were received from the delegations of Brazil, Canada, Chile, Guyana (on behalf of the States Members of the United Nations that are members of the Group of 77 and China), Germany (on behalf of the States Members of the United Nations that are members of the European Union), Switzerland and the United States of America.

Organization of the humanitarian segment

3. Delegations underlined that the humanitarian segment was an important innovation for strengthening the Economic and Social Council's role in coordination and policy guidance to humanitarian activities and that its utility should be optimized.

4. The segment should remain a key forum for high-level policy discussion on thematic issues such as: the enhancement of the role of the Economic and Social Council; the transition from relief to rehabilitation and development; assessment and evaluation of humanitarian activities; emergency response to natural disasters; coordination of humanitarian activities in complex emergencies and post-conflict situations; and the safety and security of humanitarian personnel. It was further recommended that themes should be agreed well in advance to allow for thorough preparation both by the Secretariat and by

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the delegations. It was also underlined that timely and analytical reports from the Secretariat would contribute in no small way to the quality of the Council's deliberations.

5. It was emphasized that the segment should strengthen the Economic and Social Council's capacity to review activities in the field, particularly in regard to coordination by United Nations agencies. This should enable the Council to better assess and evaluate the conduct of humanitarian activities and promote greater accountability in that regard. The segment should also enhance the Council's capacity to provide guidance to future activities.

6. More specifically with regard to the organization of the humanitarian segment of the Economic and Social Council, several delegations suggested that the segment should start with panel discussions, each with a limited number of speakers. The names of the panellists as well as the topics of their presentation should be made known well in advance so as to allow the delegations time to better prepare for the dialogue. Delegations would have the opportunity to react to statements made during the panel sessions, posing questions to the panellists as well as commenting on relevant sections of the Secretary-General's report.

7. It was suggested that the panel discussions be followed by a general discussion, in which delegations could focus their statements on issues arising from the panel discussions as well as the report of the Secretary-General. The agreed conclusions of the segment should be concrete and action-oriented.

8. With regard to the panel discussions, it was suggested that there should be two separate panels, with the participation of resident and/or humanitarian coordinators, addressing natural disasters and complex emergencies separately. The panel dealing with natural disasters should include discussion on lessons learned from Hurricane Mitch. It was also suggested that a third panel with selected executive heads of Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) agencies should focus on addressing the theme of the session,[2] namely "International cooperation and coordinated responses to the humanitarian emergencies, in particular in the transition from relief to rehabilitation, reconstruction and development". A few delegations made reference to the Brookings Round Table on the Gap between Relief and Long-term Development, suggesting that the Economic and Social Council should be informed on this process.

9. Taking into account the above-mentioned suggestions, the Economic and Social Council may wish to consider the following arrangement for the 1999 humanitarian segment:

Day 1

Afternoon session	Panel discussion on natural disasters
	Panel discussion on complex emergencies

(Each panel, of one-and-a-half hours' duration, will be composed of three speakers selected among resident and/or humanitarian coordinators of affected countries. Delegations will have the opportunity to comment on statements made during the panel sessions and pose questions to the panellists.)

Day 2

Morning session	Panel discussion, with selected executive heads of the IASC agencies, on the theme of the segment
Afternoon session	General discussion with statements by Member States

Day 3

Morning session	Continuation and conclusion of the general discussion
Afternoon[3]	Adoption of the agreed conclusions

Enhanced consideration on the part of the Economic and Social Council of the response of the United Nations to natural disasters and complex emergencies

10. In addition to specific suggestions on the organization of the humanitarian segment, the Group of 77 and China also commented on the broader question of how the Economic and Social Council could further strengthen its coordination and policy guidance role in the humanitarian field. In this context, the following elements were suggested for further consideration:

- Holding additional meetings of the Economic and Social Council, preferably at a time proximate to the occurrence of major humanitarian crises, with a view to achieving a more timely exchange of information between the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat and the members of the Council, strengthening intergovernmental oversight of the consolidated appeals process and permitting closer monitoring of development and lessons learned;
- Clarifying the division of labour, and cooperation, between and among the bodies mandated by the Charter of the United Nations on humanitarian matters;
- Promoting capacity-building for response to humanitarian emergencies, especially in countries particularly prone to natural disasters;
- Considering the possibility of a more formal arrangement for Economic and Social Council oversight of humanitarian activities in the future, including a possible role for the Council in relation to consolidated appeals (presentation, assessment, lessons learned) and the elaboration of long-term strategies for the transition from relief to rehabilitation and development.

11. The Economic and Social Council may wish to consider the above-mentioned suggestions in the broader context of the strengthening of the role of the Council. In so doing, the Council should take fully into account that the United Nations and its humanitarian organizations have a standing mandate, provided by the Charter of the United Nations and relevant intergovernmental decisions, to respond to natural disasters and other emergencies as and when they occur. It has also long been established that such responses must be provided in accordance with a number of basic principles, including, in particular, the guiding principles of humanity, neutrality and impartiality.

Notes

[1] See *Official Records of the General Assembly, Fifty-third Session, Supplement No. 3* (A/53/3), chap. VII, para. 5.

[2] See Economic and Social Council decision 1998/208 of 5 February 1999.

[3] While the Economic and Social Council could proceed with the consideration of other items in its agenda in the formal meeting, time should be set aside at the end of the meeting for the adoption of the agreed conclusions.

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Economic and Social Council

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Substantive session of 1999
Item 13 of the provisional agenda*
Economic and environmental questions

Letter dated 21 April 1999 from the Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

I have the honour to transmit herewith information from the State Committee of the Russian Federation on environmental protection "On possible environmental consequences of the military aggression by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) against Yugoslavia" (see annex).

I should be grateful if you would have the present letter and its annex circulated as a document of the Economic and Social Council under item 13 of the provisional agenda.

In view of the urgency of this issue, I would request you to take steps to have this document circulated as expeditiously as possible.

(*Signed*) S. **Lavrov**

* E/1999/100.

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Annex

State Committee of the Russian Federation on environmental protection: "Information on possible environmental consequences of the military aggression by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) against Yugoslavia"

At present NATO is intensively bombing targets in Yugoslavia. While at the beginning of the aggression, military targets were involved, the targets of the bomb and missile strikes are now chemical plants, oil depots and oil refineries.

According to expert assessments, this is causing large-scale contamination of the environment by highly toxic substances, oil and oil products, and also the products of their combustion, which may lead to long-term adverse effects because of the degradation of the environment not only in the territory of Yugoslavia itself, but also in countries of the entire European region. As a result of the bombing of the oil refinery in Pančevo and of the "Petrokhemia" and "Azotara" chemical factories alone, large quantities of oil, oil products, products of their combustion, and also dangerous, harmful, explosive and highly inflammable substances, with long-term harmful effects — carcinogenic, mutagenic and teratogenic — have been released into the environment. The danger of perceptible global climate changes as a result of the significant discharges of soot and carbon dioxide into the atmosphere cannot be excluded.

It should be noted that because of the fires associated with the bombing of chemical facilities and oil refineries, there is a great danger of contamination of the environment by such products of combustion as dioxins, dioxin compounds and benzopyrene, which may be even more toxic than the products of the chemical factories themselves.

Thus, the toxicity of dioxin greatly exceeds the toxicity of military poisons (sarin, soman, tabun), cyanides, strychnine and curare. However, a basic capability of these compounds is their ability to accumulate in the environment and in living organisms. Dioxins, even in small concentrations, cause a suppression of the immune system. In higher concentrations, they cause mutagenic, embryotoxic and teratogenic effects, and have an adverse effect on the gene pool of the population, and of the plant and animal kingdoms. Contamination by dioxins was the reason for the massive damage in Viet Nam as a result of the use of dioxin-containing herbicides by the army of the United States of America and in Seveso (Italy) as a result of an accident at a chemical combine; contamination was also recorded in the state of Missouri (United States of America) and Japan (use of food products contaminated by dioxins).

Benzopyrene, which forms when oil products burn at low temperatures (for example, in fires at oil refineries and oil depots) is a very powerful carcinogen.

The deliberate bombing of environmentally hazardous targets and the growing scale of damage to the environment demonstrate that there is a transition from localized military action to the phase of large-scale environmental warfare. A paradox of the situation is that some of Yugoslavia's closest neighbours are participating directly in the military action or expressing approval of it even though it is obvious that environmental disasters know no borders, and the territories of these countries are being exposed to the consequences of military action to the same extent as Yugoslavia itself.

The dispersal of toxins as a result of transboundary drift through the air may affect not only all the countries of Europe, but also States of the Middle East and North Africa. An example is the Chernobyl disaster, when the Swedes were the first in Europe to raise

the alarm, and the "Chernobyl effect" was recorded even in Japan. That grim experience showed that the fallout of contaminated particles is not uniform, depending on the distance to the epicentre, but there may be areas of damage over a considerable distance (over 100 kilometres).

The incidents of accidental missile strikes into the territory of Macedonia and Albania show that there is a real risk of the destruction of nuclear targets, with disastrous consequences at the global level.

Two experimental nuclear reactors and a nuclear fuel facility are located 15 km from the centre of Belgrade, there is an atomic power station in Slovenia, in the city of Krchko, and in the city of Ljubljana there is an experimental reactor. Within 300–600 km from the zone of military action, in the territory of Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania, there are three operating atomic power stations, and in Italy there are four atomic power stations, that were shut down in 1990.

In the event of the destruction or disturbance of the operation of any nuclear reactor caused by a hit by a cruise missile, an aerial bomb, the crash of an aircraft or a terrorist act, there could be an environmental disaster with serious radiological and socio-economic consequences for the population of all the countries of the former Yugoslavia, Albania, Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania, and also Austria, the Czech Republic, Greece, Italy, Slovakia, Switzerland, Turkey and other European States adjoining the zone of military conflict.

The destruction of oil refineries and oil depots has led to oil overflows and spills into bodies of water, including the Danube. The contamination of waterways may spread to the territory of other adjoining States (Bulgaria, Romania, Ukraine).

It should also be noted that during the bomb and missile strikes on towns of Yugoslavia, sanitation structures and networks may be destroyed, which poses the threat of the outbreak and spread of epidemics, particularly in places where refugees have gathered.

The NATO countries, in bombing environmentally hazardous targets in Yugoslavia, are violating the provisions of the Convention on the Prohibition of Military or Any Other Hostile Use of Environmental Modification Techniques (Environment Convention of 1977), article 1.1 of which states: "Each State Party to this Convention undertakes not to engage in military or any other hostile use of environmental modification techniques having widespread, long-lasting or severe effects as the means of destruction, damage or injury to any other State Party".

It should be noted that the provisions of a number of other international conventions and international declarations which restrict damage to the environment as a result of military action are also being violated:

World Charter for Nature, 1982, article 5: "Nature shall be secured against degradation caused by warfare or other hostile activities" and article 20: "Military activities damaging to nature shall be avoided";

Stockholm Declaration on the Human Environment, 1972;

Convention for the protection of the world cultural and natural heritage (World Heritage Convention 1972), article 6, paragraph 3: "Each State Party to this Convention undertakes not to take any deliberate measures which might damage directly or indirectly the cultural and natural heritage ... situated on the territory of other States Parties to this Convention";

Protocol I additional to the 1949 Geneva Conventions, relating to the protection of victims of international armed conflicts, article 35, paragraph 3: "It is prohibited to employ methods or means of warfare which are intended, or may be expected, to cause widespread, long-term and severe damage to the natural environment".